

Hyndman on Marx

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The voluminous memoirs of one of the founders and leaders of the British Social-Democratic Party, Henry Mayers Hyndman, have recently been published. The book of nearly five hundred pages is entitled *The Record of an Adventurous Life*^[1] and represents the reminiscences, written in lively fashion, of the author’s political activity and of the “celebrities” he knew. Hyndman’s book provides a great deal of interesting material for the characterisation of British socialism and for an appraisal of certain important problems affecting the entire international working-class movement.

We therefore think it timely to devote a few articles to Hyndman’s book, particularly in view of the fact that the Flight-wing Cadet *Russkiye Vedomosti* published (on October 14) an article by the liberal Dioneo, which provides an admirable example of how the liberals throw light, or rather darkness, on these problems.

Let us start with Hyndman’s reminiscences of Marx. Hyndman made his acquaintance only in 1880, when he apparently knew very little

about Marx's teachings and about socialism in general. It is characteristic of British relationships that, born in 1842, Hyndman, until the moment we are speaking of, was a "democrat" of an indefinite hue who had contacts and sympathies with the Conservative Party (Tories). Hyndman turned to socialism after reading *Capital* (in the French translation) during one of his numerous voyages to America between 1874 and 1880.

Accompanied by Karl Hirsch, Hyndman, on his way to visit Marx, mentally compared him to—Mazzini!

The level at which Hyndman makes this comparison can be judged from the fact that he describes Mazzini's influence on those around him as "personal and individually ethical", and considered Marx's influence to be "almost wholly intellectual and scientific". Hyndman went to Marx as to a "supreme analytical genius" and was eager to learn from him; what attracted him in Mazzini was his character and his "elevation of thought and conduct". But that Marx "was far the more powerful mind cannot be disputed". Nor can it be disputed that Hyndman very poorly understood in 1880 (and does not quite understand even now—but of that later) the difference between a bourgeois democrat and a socialist.

"The first impression of Marx as I saw him," writes Hyndman, "was that of a powerful, shaggy, untamed old man, ready; not to say eager, to enter into conflict, and rather suspicious himself of immediate attack. Yet his greeting to us was cordial and his first remarks to me, after I had told him what a great pleasure and honour I felt it to be to shake hands with the author of *Capital*, were agreeable enough; for he told me that he had read my articles on India^[2] with pleasure and had commented on them favourably in his newspaper correspondence.

"When speaking with fierce indignation of the policy of the Liberal Party, especially in regard to Ireland, the old warrior's small deep-sunk eyes lighted up, his heavy brows wrinkled, the broad, strong nose and face were obviously moved by passion, and he poured out a stream of vigorous denunciation, which displayed alike the heat of his temperament and the marvellous command he possessed

over our language. The contrast between his manner and utterance when thus deeply stirred by anger and his attitude when giving his views on the economic events of the period was very marked. He turned from the role of prophet and vehement denunciator to that of the calm philosopher without any apparent effort, and I felt from the first that on this latter ground many a long year might pass before I ceased to be a student in the presence of a master.

“I had been surprised in reading *Capital*, and still more when perusing his smaller works, such as his pronouncement on the Commune of Paris, and his *Eighteenth Brumaire*, how he combined the ablest and coolest examination of economic causes and social effects with the most bitter hatred of classes and even of individual men such as Napoleon III or M. Thiers, who, according to his own theories, were little more than flies upon the wheels of the great Juggernaut car of capitalist development. Marx, of course, was a Jew, and to me it seemed that he combined in his own person and nature, with his commanding forehead and great overhanging brow, his fierce glittering eyes, broad sensitive nose and mobile mouth, all surrounded by a setting of untrimmed hair and beard, the righteous fury of the great seers of his race, with the cold analytical powers of Spinoza and the Jewish doctors. It was an extraordinary combination of qualities, the like of which I have known in no other man.

“As I went out with Hirsch, deeply impressed by the great personality we had left, Hirsch asked me what I thought of Marx. ‘Well,’ I replied, ‘I think he is the Aristotle of the nineteenth century.’ And yet as I said it, I knew that this did not cover the ground. For one thing it was quite impossible to think of Marx as acting the courtier to Alexander (of Macedonia) while carrying on the profound studies which have so deeply influenced later generations, and besides he never so wholly segregated himself from immediate human interests—notwithstanding much that has been said to the contrary—as to be able to consider facts and their surroundings in the cold hard light of the greatest philosopher of antiquity. There can be no doubt what ever that his hatred of the system of exploitation and wage slavery by which he was surrounded was not only intellectual and philosophic but bitterly personal.

“I remember saying to him once that as I grew older, I thought I became more tolerant. ‘Do you,’ he said, ‘do you?’ It was quite certain he didn’t. It has been, I think, Marx’s

deep animosity to the existing order of things and his scathing criticism of his opponents which has prevented many of the educated well-to-do class from appreciating his masterly life-work at its full value and has rendered third-rate sciolists and logomachers like Böhm-Bawerk, such heroes in their eyes, merely because they have misrepresented and attempted to 'refute' him. Accustomed as we are nowadays, especially in England, to fence always with big soft buttons on the point of our rapiers, Marx's terrible onslaughts with naked steel upon his adversaries appeared so improper that it was impossible for our gentlemanly sham fighters and mental gymnasium men to believe that this unsparing controversialist and furious assailant of capital and capitalists was really the deepest thinker of modern times."

In 1880 Marx was practically unknown to the British public. His health was then failing. His strenuous exertions (sixteen hours a day and more of mental labour!) had sapped his constitution. He was now forbidden by his doctors to do any work in the evenings and, Hyndman relates, "at the close of 1880 and the beginning of 1881, I had the advantage of very frequent conversations with the Doctor".

"Our method of talking was peculiar. Marx had a habit when at all interested in the discussion of walking actively up and down the room as if he were pacing the deck of a schooner for exercise. I had acquired on my long voyages (to America, Australia, etc.) the same tendency of pacing to and fro when my mind was much occupied. Consequently, master and student could have been seen walking up and down on opposite sides of the table for two or three hours in succession, engaged in discussing the affairs of the past and the present."

Hyndman does not give anything like a detailed account of the position Marx took *on even a single one of the questions* he discussed with him. From what is quoted above it can be seen that Hyndman concentrated mostly, almost exclusively, indeed, on the *anecdotal* side; this is in line with the rest of his book. Hyndman's autobiography is the life story of a British bourgeois philistine who, being the pick of his class, finally makes his way to socialism, but never completely throws off bourgeois traditions, bourgeois views and prejudices.

While repeating the philistine reproaches against Marx and Engels that they were “autocrats” in “what was supposed to be a democratic” International, that they did not understand practical affairs, did not know people, etc., Hyndman never makes an attempt to test a single one of these reproaches on the basis of an exact, concrete analysis of the circumstances at the periods concerned.

The result is anecdote and not Marxist historical analysis. Marx and Engels fought against the unification of German Social-Democracy (with the Lassalleans^[3]), whereas this unity was necessary! That is all that Hyndman says. He does not say a word about Marx and Engels having been a thousand times right in principle in their opposition to Lassalle and the Lassalleans. He does not even raise the question. He does not even ask himself whether “democracy” (organisational) in the period of the International was not a screen for bourgeois sects engaged in disrupting the work of building up proletarian Social-Democracy.

As a result, the story of Hyndman’s rupture with Marx is told in such a way that we get absolutely nothing but gossip (in the spirit of the Dioneos). Engels, you see, was “exacting, suspicious, jealous”; Marx’s wife is alleged to have told Hyndman’s wife that Engels was Marx’s “evil genius” (!); Engels, whom Hyndman never even met (despite what Mr. Dioneo has written in *Russkiye Vedomosti*), was “not disinclined to give full weight to the exchange value of his ready cash in his relations with those whom he helped” (with money; Engels was very rich, Marx very poor). Engels is said to have caused a quarrel between Marx and Hyndman, out of fear that Hyndman, a wealthy man at that time, would take Engels’s place as Marx’s rich friend!

Of course, the liberals derive pleasure from rehashing such inexpressible vulgarities. And of course it is not at all in the interests of the liberal hacks at least to acquaint themselves with the letters (of Marx and Engels^[4]) to Sorge, referred to by Hyndman himself, and *to try and understand* the point at issue. They do not take the trouble to do that! And yet a reference to these letters and a comparison between them and Hyndman’s “memoirs” would immediately settle the matter.

In 1881 Hyndman published a pamphlet entitled *England for All* in which he adopts socialism but remains a very, very confused bourgeois democrat. The pamphlet was written for the Democratic Federation (not socialist) which had then been founded and to which a large number of anti-socialist elements belonged. Hyndman paraphrases and copies from *Capital* in two chapters of this pamphlet, *but does not mention Marx*; however, in the preface he speaks vaguely of a certain “great thinker” and “original writer” to whom he is greatly indebted, etc. Hyndman tells us that it was over this that Engels caused a “breach” between him and Marx, and at the same time quotes a letter Marx had written to him (dated December 8, 1880), in which Marx says that, according to Hyndman, he, Hyndman, “does not share the views of my [Marx’s] party for England”.

It is clear what the difference was—a difference not understood, noticed, or appreciated by Hyndman. It was that Hyndman at that time (as Marx plainly wrote to Sorge on December 15, 1881) was a “well-meaning, petty-bourgeois writer”, “half-bourgeois, half-proletarian”. Obviously if a man who makes the acquaintance of Marx, becomes intimate with him, calls himself a student of his, later forms a “democratic” federation and writes a pamphlet for it in which he misrepresents Marxism and does not mention Marx, the latter could not let it pass without making a “furious” protest. Evidently the protest was made, for Marx in the same letter to Sorge quotes extracts from letters of apology in which Hyndman excuses himself on the ground that “the English don’t like to be taught by foreigners” and that “my [Marx’s] name was so much detested” (!), etc. (Hyndman himself states that he destroyed nearly all of Marx’s letters to him, so that the discovery of the truth from this side is not to be expected.)

Fine apologies, are they not! Well, at a time when the question of the then existing differences between Hyndman and Marx has been cleared up quite definitely, and when even the whole of Hyndman’s present book shows that there is much of the philistine and bourgeois in his views (for example, the arguments with which Hyndman defends capital punishment for criminals!), what is offered as the explanation of

his rupture with Marx is the “intrigues” of Engels, who for forty years, followed a common line of principle with Marx. Even if all the rest of Hyndman’s book were a barrel of honey, this one spoonful of tar would be enough to spoil it!

The differences between Marx and Hyndman at that time are most characteristically revealed by what Hyndman tells us about Marx’s opinion of Henry George. Marx’s appraisal of Henry George is known from his letter to Sorge dated June 20, 1881. Talking with Marx, Hyndman defended Henry George using the following argument: “George will teach more by inculcating error than other men can impart by complete exposition of the truth”.

“Marx,” writes Hyndman, “would not hear of this as a sound contention. The promulgation of error could never be of any good to the people, that was his view. ‘To leave error unrefuted is to encourage intellectual immorality. For ten who go farther, a hundred may very easily stop with George, and the danger of this is too great to run!’” That was what Marx said!

Yet Hyndman tells us that, on the one hand, he still holds to his previous opinion of Henry George, and that, on the other hand, George was a boy with a bright farthing dip fooling around within the radius of a man using an electric searchlight.

An excellent comparison, only ... only it was risky for Hyndman to make this excellent comparison side by side with his miserable gossip about Engels.

Notes

[1] *The Record of an Adventurous Life*, by Henry Mayers Hyndman, London (Macmillan & Co.), 1911. —*Lenin*

[2] Until he recently turned to jingoism, Hyndman was a determined enemy of British imperialism, and from 1878 carried on a noble campaign of exposure against the shameful acts of violence, outrage, plunder, and indignity

(including the flogging of political “criminals”) for which Britishers of all parties in India, including the “educated” and “radical” author, John Morley, have long made themselves famous. —*Lenin*

[3] *Lassalleans*—supporters of the German petty-bourgeois socialist Ferdinand Lassalle (1825–1864), members of the General Association of German Workers founded in 1863 at the Congress of Workers’ Organisations, held in Leipzig, to counterbalance the bourgeois progressists who were endeavouring to gain influence over the working class. The first Chairman of the Association was Lassalle, who formulated its programme and tactics. The Association’s political programme was the struggle for universal suffrage, and its economic programme, the struggle for the workers’ production associations, subsidised by the state. In their practical activities, Lassalle and his followers adapted themselves to the hegemony of Prussia and supported the Great-Power policy of Bismarck. “Objectively”, wrote Engels to Marx on January 27, 1865, “this was a base action and a betrayal of the whole working-class movement to the Prussians”. Marx and Engels frequently and sharply criticised the theory, tactics, and organisational principles of the Lassalleans as an opportunist trend in the German working-class movement.

[4] This refers to the letters, quoted below by Lenin, of Marx to Sorge of June 20 and December 15, 1881.